

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3675

S E C R E T SAIGON 11374

EXDIS

E. O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MOPS MARR VS

SUBJECT: MR 2 ULTIMATUM TO NVA/ VC OVER KONTUM LAND- GRAB

FOLLOWING SENT ACTION SAIGON FROM NHA TRANG JUNE 23

REPEATED TO YOU

QUOTE NHA TRANG 0635

1. DURING DCM' S CALLS JUNE 23 ON MR 2 COMMANDER MAJ. GEN NGUYEN VAN TOAN (A. M.) AND 23 RD DIVISION COMMANDER BRIG. GEN. TRAN VAN CAM (P. M.) WE WERE GIVEN INDICATIONS THAT THE TWO MEN WERE PLANNING TO ISSUE AN " ULTIMATUM" TO THE NVA/ VC OVER THE OCCUPATION OF TRUNG NGHIA AND POLIE KRONG VILLAGES.

2. IN TOAN' S VERSION, VNAF WOULD BOMB THE COMMUNIST- CONTROLLED POINTS- OF- ENTRY AT DUC CO (PLEIKU PROVINCE) AND AT BEN HET (KONTUM PROVINCE) IF THE NVA/ VC DID NOT WITHDRAW FROM THE TWO VILLAGES WITHIN FIVE DAYS. TOAN DID NOT STATE HOW SOON HE INTENDED TO ISSUE THIS ULTIMATUM, NOR DID HE INDICATE WHETHER HE HAD OBTAINED (OF PLANNED TO SEEK) JGS APPROVAL FOR ITS ISSUANCE.

3. CAM' S REFERENCE WAS EVEN MORE VAGUE AND CAME AT THE END OF A FORMAL BRIEFING IN FRONT OF HIS ENTIRE STAFF. HIS APPROXIMATE WORDS WERE, " THE NEXT TIME THE VC ATTACK KONTUM, WE ARE GOING TO BOMB BEN HET AND PHUNG HOANG." (PHUNG HOANG 2 IS THE AIRSTRIP NEAR DAK TO WHICH G-2 BRIEFER A FEW MINUTES EARLIER HAD SAID NVA WERE IMPROVING. IT IS ALSO, AS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED,

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THE AIRFIELD WHICH ICCS WOULD LIKE TO USE AS A BAD- WEATHER ALTERNATE LANDING SITE TO BEN HET PROVIDED ICCS COULD OBTAIN GUARANTEES OF SECURITY FOR ROAD TRAVEL FROM PHUNG HOANG TO BEN HET.)

4. BETWEEN TOAN AND CAM CALLS, KONTUM PROVINCE REP REPORTED HAVING LEARNED FROM A LOCAL INDODEL THAT CHIEF OF GVN TPJMT ELEMENT HAD APPROACHED ICCS THIS MORNING, ASKING THAT ICCS DELIVER AN ULTIMATUM TO THE PRG. ACCORDING TO INDODEL, CANADIAN CHAIRMAN FOR THE WEEK ASKED THAT TPJMT CHIEF' S ORAL MESSAGE BE DELIVERED IN WRITING.

5. FURTHER CHECKING BY KONTUM POLOFF REVEALS THAT THE TPJMT CHIEF IN KONTUM DID IN FACT DELIVER WRITTEN MESSAGE TO ICCS AT 1730 HOURS FOR TRANSMITTAL TO PRG. MESSAGE ITSELF IS BRIEF AND STATES SIMPLY THAT BEN HET AND PHUNG HOANG WILL BE BOMBED IF NVA DOES NOT EVACUATE TRUNG NGHIA VILLAGE WITHIN FIVE DAYS, STARTING FROM DATE OF MESSAGE (JUNE 23). MESSAGE CONTAINS NO RPT NO ADVICE FOR ICCS ITSELF, ALTHOUGH ICCS TEAM IS IN BEN HET. (ADDRESSEES ARE " ACTION: ICCS/ KONTUM, INFO: ICCS/ PLEIKU, WITH NO REFERENCE TO ICCS HEADQUARTERS IN SAIGON.)

6. COMMENT: WE LEARNED JUNE 23 THAT TOAN HAD VISITED KONTUM JUNE 22 AND REMAINED OVERNIGHT, AT WHICH TIME ULTIMATUM IDEA MUST HAVE BEEN DISCUSSED. WE BELIEVE BOTH GENERALS ARE HIGHLY FRUSTRATED BY LACK OF PROGRESS TO DATE IN DRIVING THE NVA FROM TRUNG NGHIA AREA, AND THEY MAY BE UNDER PRESSURE FROM SAIGON TO FINISH THE JOB. (FORCES NOW RANGED AGAINST NVA IN TRUNG NGHIA INCLUDE THREE REGULAR ARVN BATTALIONS. ARTILLERY WAS EMPLOYED AGAINST TRUNG NGHIA THROUGHOUT THE DAY, AND AIRSTRIKES BEGAN AS SOON AS WEATHER CLEARED SUFFICIENTLY. ACTION GREW HEAVIER IN LATE AFTERNOON, AND POLOFF UNDERSTANDS ARVN MAY BE MAKING MAJOR PUSH ON GROUND TONIGHT.) IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT ULTIMATUM RESULTS FROM THAT FRUSTRATION.

7. OUR FIRST REACTION WAS SOMEWHAT SKEPTICAL, ALTHOUGH DCM INDICATED TO BOTH MEN -- AND PARTICULARLY TO CAM, SINCE BY TIME THAT CALL WE HAD LEARNED OF ORAL MESSAGE FOR PRG DELIVERED TO ICCS IN MORNING -- THAT USG WOULD REGARD MILITARY ACTION DIRECTED AGAINST ANY PRG- CONTROLLED POINT- OF- ENTRY AS UNWISE AND REGRETTABLE, NO MATTER HOW THOROUGHLY USG MIGHT UNDERSTAND
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GENERALS' FRUSTRATION.

8. WE ARE NOW SATISFIED, HOWEVER, THAT THE ULTIMATUM HAS BEEN ISSUED. FURTHERMORE, PRG HAS PROBABLY KNOWN OF IT FOR SEVERAL HOURS, SINCE POLGARIANS GOT ON THEIR RADIOS IMMEDIATELY AFTER TPJMT CHIEF' S ORAL PRESENTATION TO ICCS THIS MORNING. (HOWEVER, THE REGION III ICCS CHIEFS, ALL OF WHOM LUNCHEDED WITH DCM IN

PLEIKU, GAVE NO INDICATION THAT THEY KNEW OF ULTIMATUM.)

9. THERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS WE CANNOT ANSWER, HOWEVER. PROBABLY MOST IMPORTANT IS WHETHER TOAN OBTAINED JGS (AND PERHAPS PRESIDENTIAL) AUTHORIZATION TO ISSUE THIS ULTIMATUM. IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE HIS TAKING SUCH A MAJOR INITIATIVE WITHOUT HIGHER- LEVEL CLEARANCE BUT ALSO DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE GVN' S AUTHORIZING SUCH AN ACTION AT THIS POINT IM TIME. ANOTHER MAJOR QUESTION IS WHETHER TOAN AND CAM ARE TRYING TO BLUFF THE NVA. THEY MAY BE, BUT EVEN THE BLUFF ITSELF COULD HAVE SERIOUS REPERCUSSIONS.

10. THE NVA OCCUPATION OF TRUNG NGHIA AND POLEI KRONG IS THE ONLY CLEAR- CUT ENEMY LAND- GRAB IN THIS MR IN THE CEASE- FIRE II PERIOD. THERE IS LITTLE QUESTION THAT THE GVN IS JUSTIFIED IN SEEKING TO RETAKE THE TERRITORY, ALTHOUGH GVN APPEARS TO HAVE GIVEN NO PARTICULAR PRIORITY TO PROTESTING IT. (KONTUM PROVINCE CHIEF SAID JUNE 23 HE WAS STILL DODUMENTING THE TWO- WEEK- OLD ENEMY SEIZURE FOR SUBMISSION OF PROTEST THROUGH TPJMC CHANNELS.) STRONGLY BELIEVE GVN WOULD BE BETTER ADVISED TO MAINTAIN ITS " SINNED- AGAINST" POSTURE AND NOT MUDDY THE WATERS BY TAKING OR EVEN THREATENING ESSENTIALLY UNRELATED RETALIATORY ACTION CERTAIN TO DRAW INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION. SIGNED TEARE
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